



1-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Rawlinson, A. (2000). Rawlinson, A. (2000). A model of experiential comparative religion. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 19(1), 99–108.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 19 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2000.19.1.99>



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A Model of Experiential Comparative Religion

Andrew Rawlinson

La Voulte, France

Presented here is a higher-order vocabulary—with numerous examples—that can handle the fundamental elements of all traditions: not only the general ones (ontology/cosmology/anthropology/soteriology; consciousness/spiritual practice/teacher/transmission) but the particular ones (initiation, effort, bliss, illusion) and what might be called the “extra-traditional” ones (standard, intellect, what is “right”). The shorthand for this model is *Hot/Cool/Structured/Unstructured*.

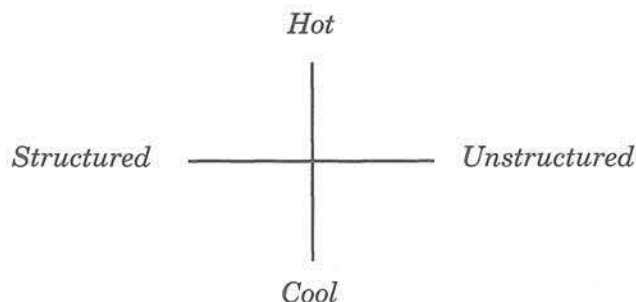
HUMAN BEINGS are incorrigible comparers. “Daddy, are clouds mashed potato in the sky?” my son asked me at the age of five or so. Twenty years later, he is doing an MA that includes comparative religion. He is not finding it easy—and he isn’t the first. I don’t claim to have all the answers, in fact, I may not have any. But a lifetime of wrestling with this topic has led me to one conclusion: comparative religion must begin with a vocabulary, a form of *seeing*, that is of a higher order than the traditions themselves.

“Higher order” does not mean “wiser” of course. The aim is simply to fashion a shape in which we can place the various traditions (and without first having to make up our minds what a tradition is)—because only then can they move about with some degree of freedom. Then *we* can go in and out of them with some degree of freedom, too.

One of the attractions of this approach is that it is highly adjustable. Anyone can take the model I propose and fine-tune it by adding other elements or improving the ones I’ve given. It’s an adaptable shape, not a fixed one. So it’s got some life in it.

The starting point is two pairs of polar concepts: *Hot* and *Cool*; *Structured* and *Unstructured* (see Diagram 1).

Diagram 1
The Four Variables



Hot is that which is other than oneself; that which has its own life. It is not something that one has access to as of right. It is powerful and breathtaking, and is associated with revelation and grace. It is very similar to Otto's numinous.

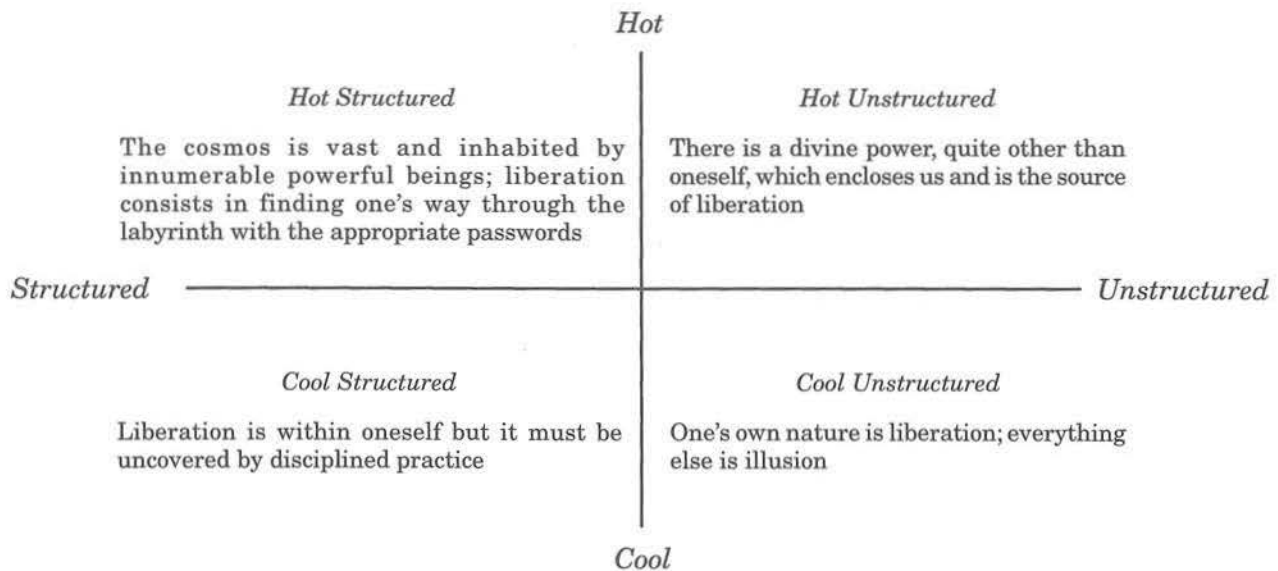
Cool is the very essence of oneself; one need not go to another to find it. Hence one *does* have access to it as of right. It is quiet and still, and is associated with self-realization.

The meaning of *Structured* is that there is an inherent order in the cosmos and therefore in the human condition. There is something to be discovered and there is a way of discovering it. A map is required to find the destination.

By contrast, *Unstructured* teachings say that there is no gap between the starting point and the finishing post. Method and goal are identical. We are not separate from reality/truth/God and so no map is required. Everything is available now and always has been.

Although these four statements concerning the human condition are all related, they are based on quite different axioms. But they are all true. I shall give examples from the great traditions in a moment, but first we need to see that the two pairs can be combined—see Diagram 2.

Diagram 2
The Four Combinations

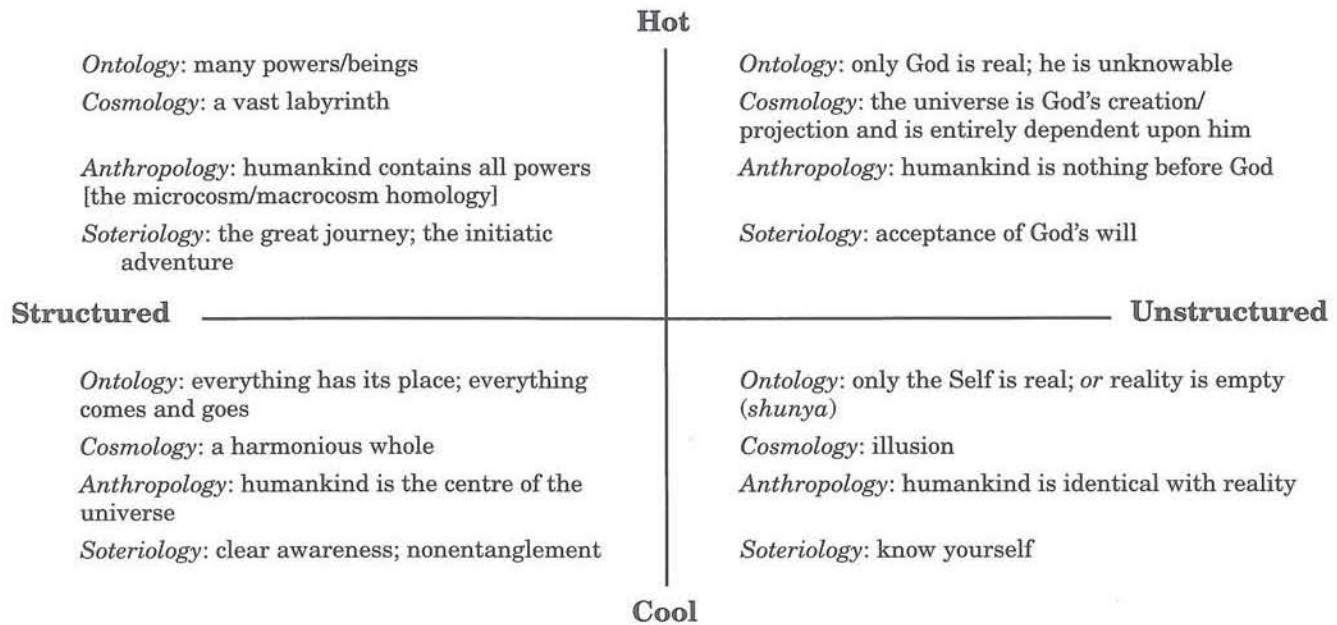


This model can hold a lot of detail. For example, we can use it to highlight different versions of four categories that are fundamental to all traditions in some form or other:

| | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>ontology</i> | the nature of reality |
| <i>cosmology</i> | the nature of the universe |
| <i>anthropology</i> | the nature of humankind |
| <i>soteriology</i> | the nature of liberation |

The different versions of these four are given in Diagram 3.

Diagram 3
The Different Categories of Teaching Found in Spiritual Traditions



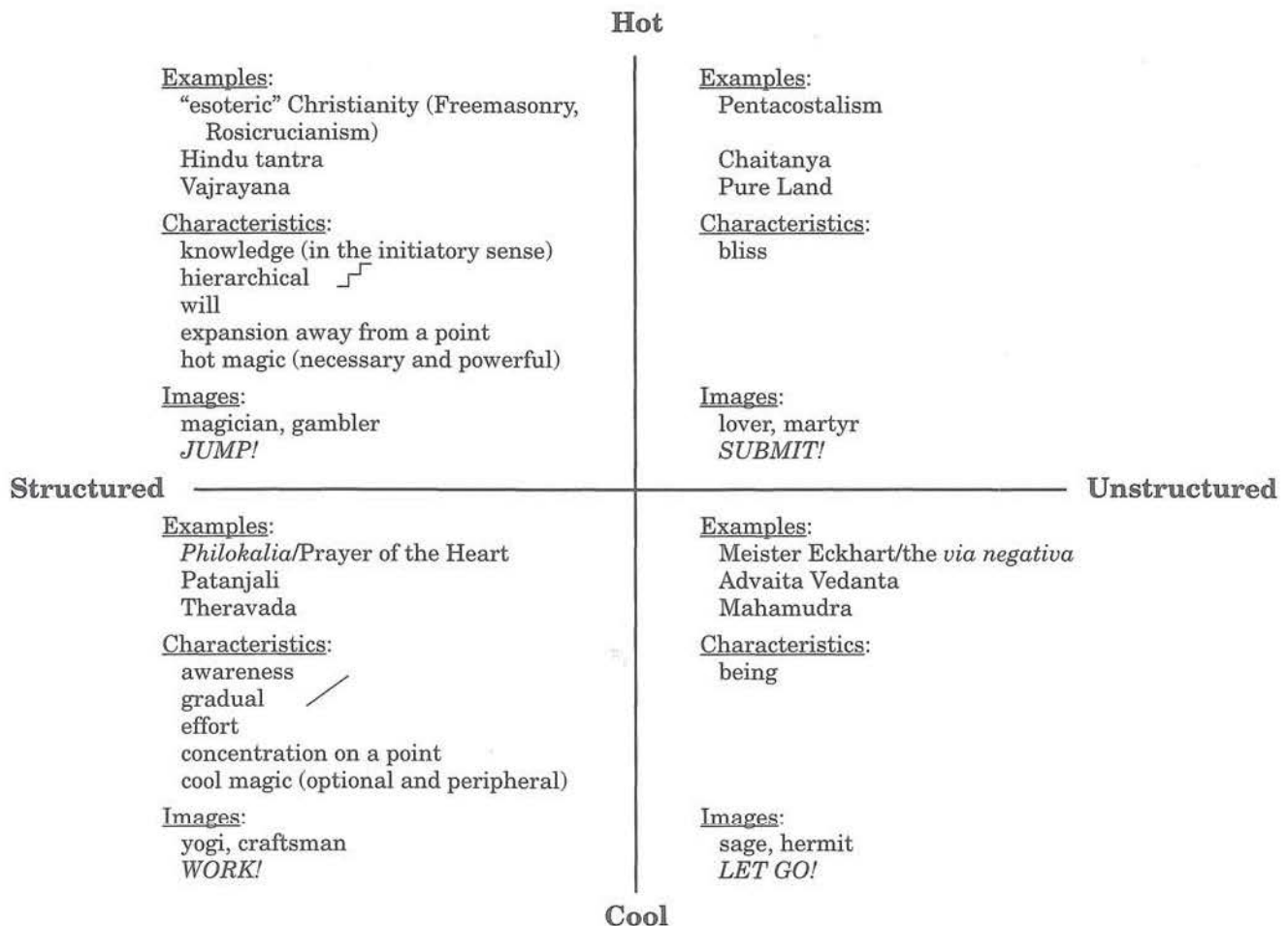
It is interesting to look at the subtraditions within Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism (in that order) that fit each section of the model, along with some essential characteristics and images that exemplify them—see Diagram 4. We can bring together teachings as diverse as Tantra, Pentecostalism, Advaita Vedanta, and Theravada Buddhism; and also relate qualities such as bliss and awareness, or hierarchy and (pure) being, which are central to any discussion of the spiritual life.

However, a few explanations may be needed.

First, it is no accident that the characteristics on the *Structured* side are more numerous than those of the *Unstructured* side. Naturally (and I use the word in its literal sense), the *Unstructured* cannot have a wealth of qualities since it obliterates distinctions.

Second, the members of each polar pair complement each other. Take *Hot Structured* and *Cool Structured* as examples (see Diagram 4):

Diagram 4
Further Aspects of the Model



Hot Structured

initiatory knowledge is something one is granted—and it may be disturbing

the path requires the exercise of **will**, which allows the practitioner to break through the barriers that are in his/her way in an ever-increasing series of leaps

it also requires the use of **(hot) magic**, which is simply the manipulation of the laws of the cosmos in the service of self-transformation; this is not an option—it is bound to happen and one has to be prepared for it by rigorous training

examples:

Vedic ritual, which is concerned with participation in the sacred world of the gods;

Don Juan's way of the *nagual*, which is full of the unexpected if not downright impossible. (I leave aside the question of whether Castaneda invented the whole thing.)

Cool Structured

awareness is dispassionate and part of oneself

all that is required is constant **effort**; the path is very restrained; there is a task to be accomplished but the method is ordered and gentle; the practitioner starts on page one of the manual, so to speak, and works his/her way through to the end; everything happens as it should in the fullness of time

at a certain point, **(cool) magical powers** appear, it is true—but they are incidental to the aim, which is balance and timing

examples:

Confucian ritual, which aims to establish a correct relationship with the cosmic principle;

The Course in Miracles, which is "magical" but so reassuring.

Similarly, *JUMP!* and *WORK!* have an element in common (they are both *Structured*), just as *JUMP!* and *SUBMIT!* do (though this time it is the *Hot* element); and similarly for *SUBMIT!* and *LET GO!* (both *Unstructured*) and *WORK!* and *LET GO!* (both *Cool*).

Third, the opposite corners of the model have nothing in common (which is to say that they will find great difficulty in communicating with, or even understanding, each other): the *magician* (*Hot Structured*) regards the *hermit* (*Cool Unstructured*) as a stick-in-the-mud, someone who avoids life and its challenges, while the hermit sees the magician as at best all show and flummery, and at worst as positively dangerous. The *yogi* (*Cool Structured*) looks upon the *martyr* (*Hot Unstructured*) as someone with more conviction than sense; the *lover* has no doubt that the *craftsman* has missed the point *completely*.

Similarly, *JUMP!* (*Hot Structured*) is the exact opposite of *LET GO!* (*Cool Unstructured*); and the same is true of the other two corners: *SUBMIT!* (*Hot Unstructured*) and *WORK!* (*Cool Structured*).

I am not saying that the traditions I have given as examples are limited to the section of the model to which I have assigned them. Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, which is the best-known form of Vajrayana, has an obvious *Cool Structured* side (or level). But I am saying that its highest values are *Hot Structured* rather than *Cool Structured*. That is why, in the end, it is worlds away from Theravada, whose highest values are *Cool Structured* (even if some of its forms present *nibbana* as a *Cool Unstructured* ideal).

We can also apply the model to the four principles of what I call spiritual psychology:

- human beings are best understood in terms of *consciousness* and its manifestations;
- consciousness can be transformed by *spiritual practice*;
- there are *gurus / masters / teachers* who have done this;
- and there can be *transmission* of this awareness from teacher to disciple.

(See Diagram 5.)

Diagram 5
Spiritual Psychology According to the Model

| | | | |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|--|
| | | Hot | |
| Structured | <i>Consciousness</i> : divine and hierarchical <i>Spiritual Practice</i> : a series of leaps/ | | |

Diagram 6
Traditions and Spiritual Psychology
COOL STRUCTURED

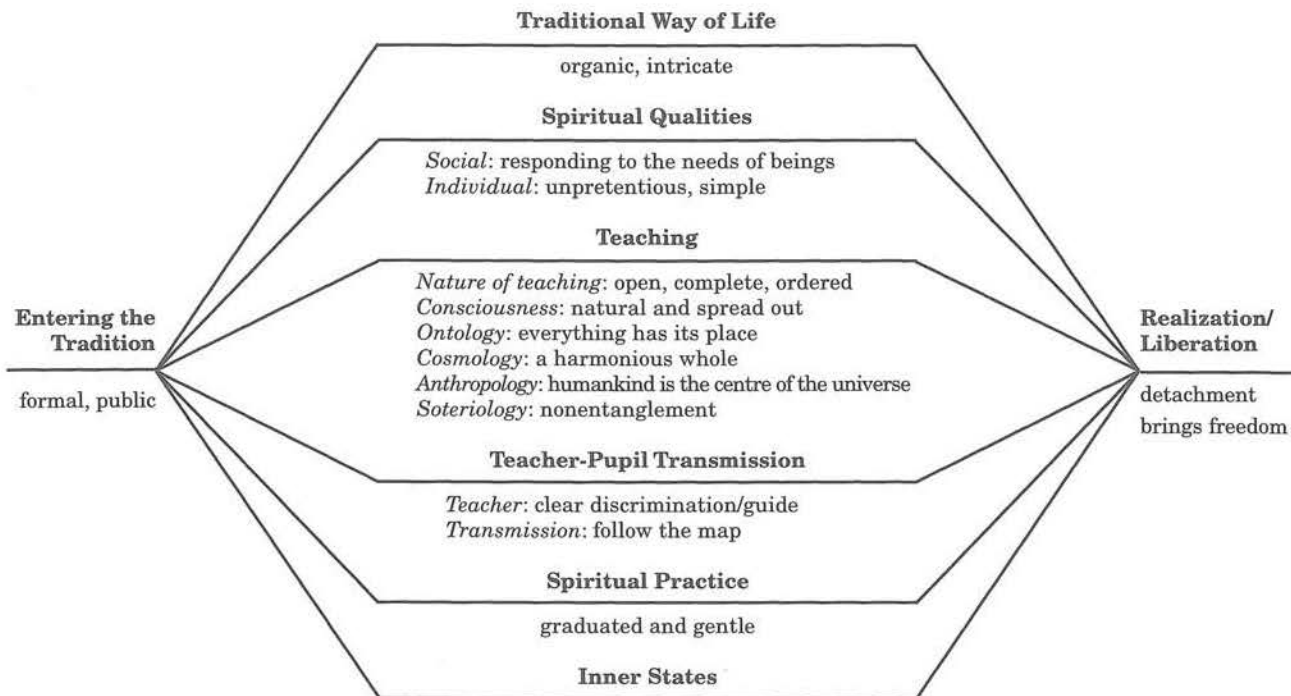


Diagram 7
Traditions and Spiritual Psychology
HOT STRUCTURED

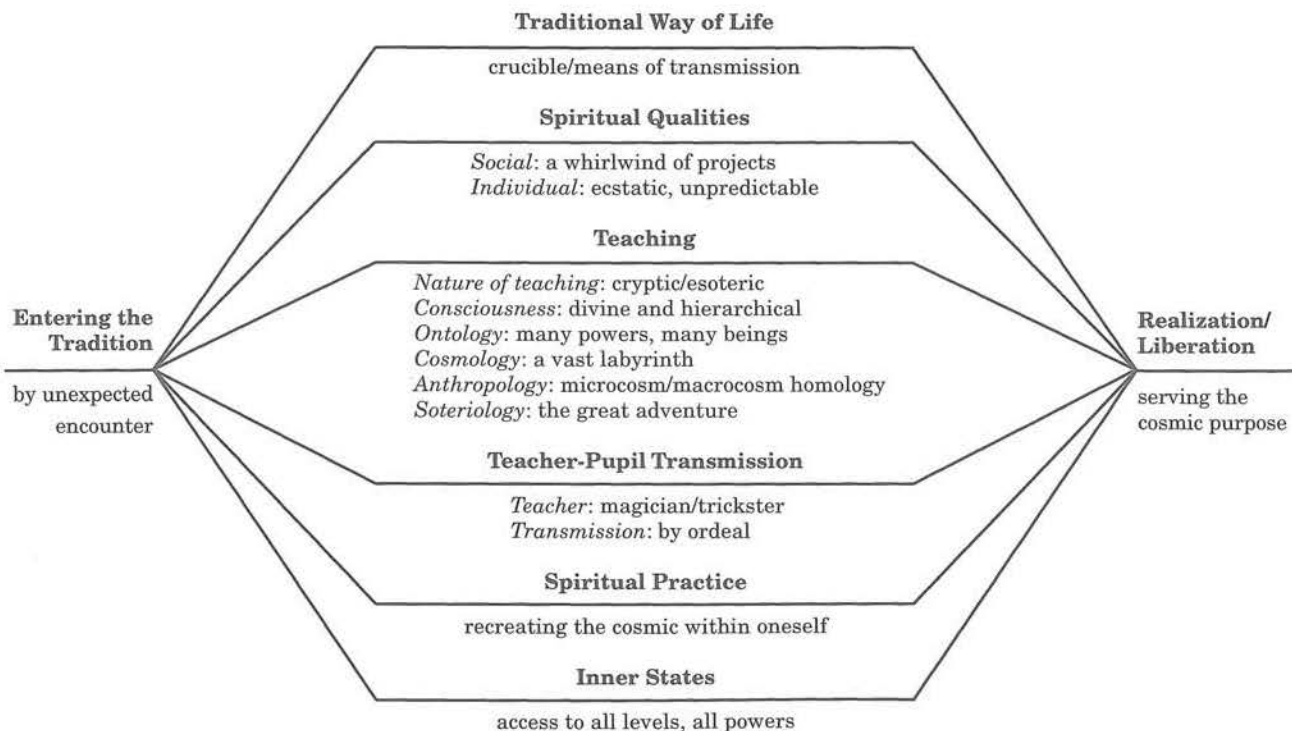


Diagram 8 Traditions and Spiritual Psychology HOT UNSTRUCTURED

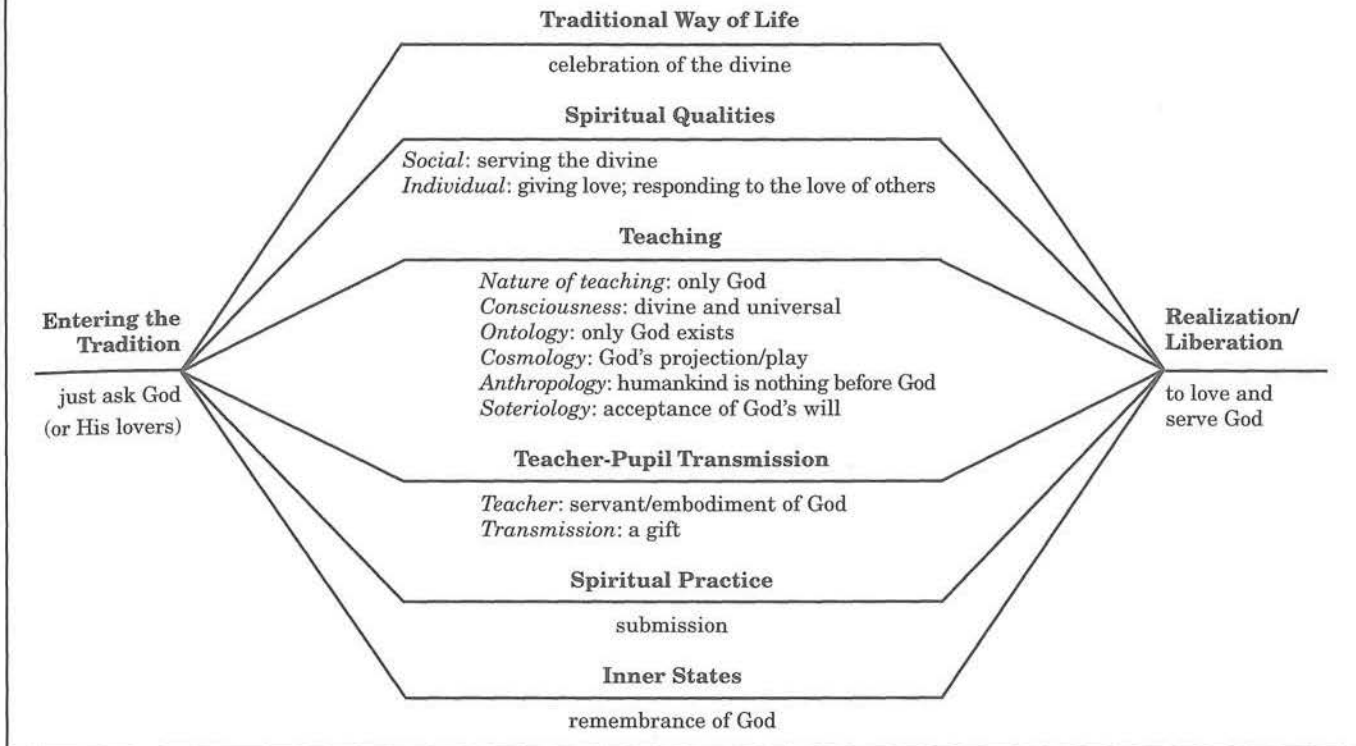
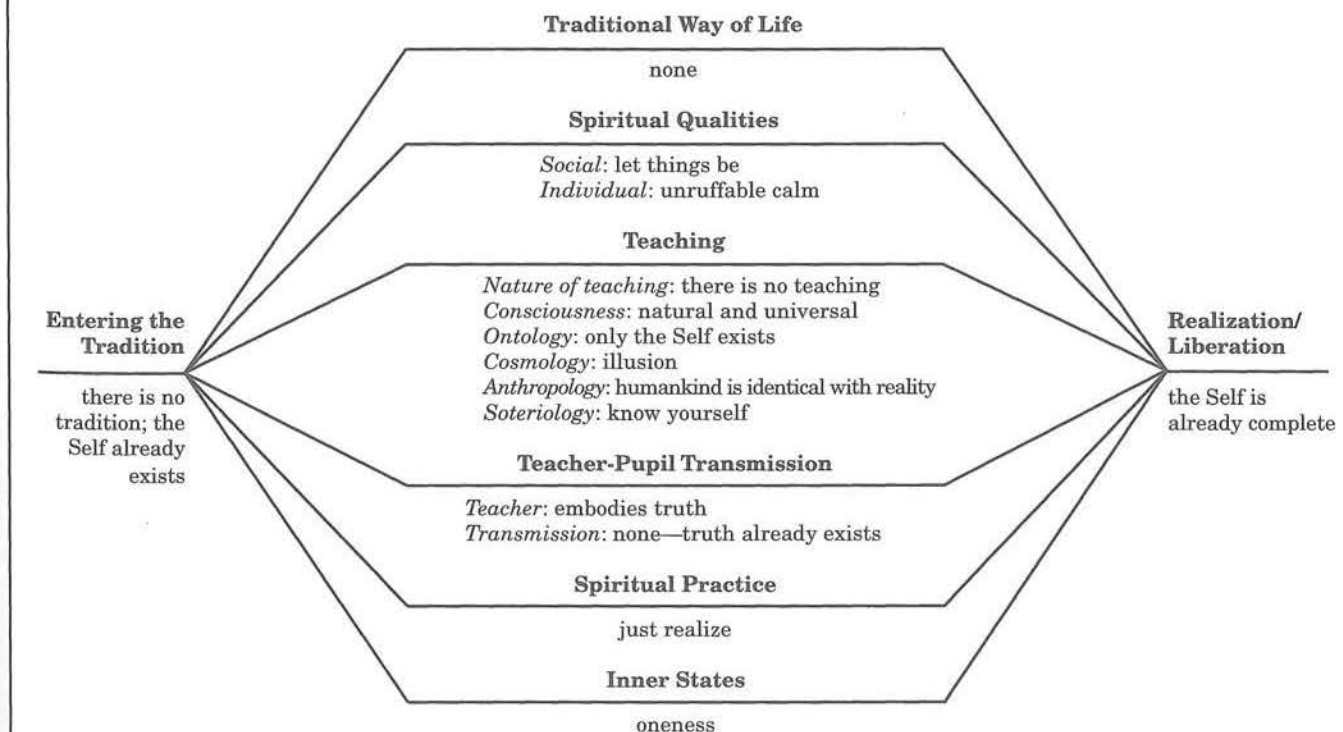
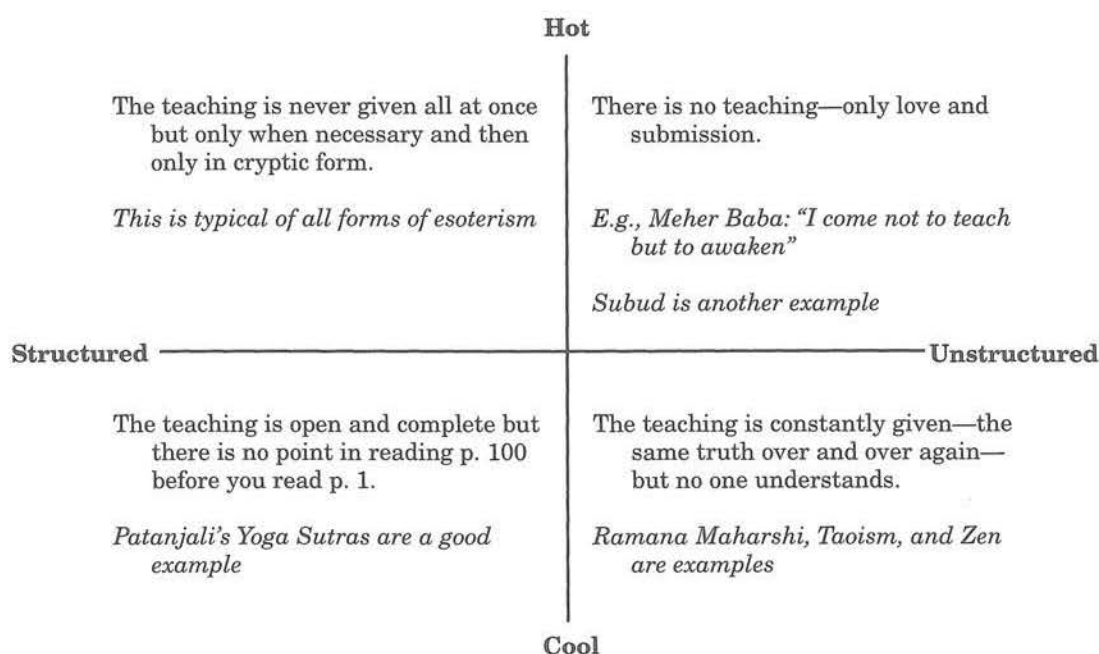


Diagram 9 Traditions and Spiritual Psychology COOL UNSTRUCTURED



And we can apply the model to *Hot/Cool/Structured/Unstructured* traditions (see Diagrams 6,7,8,9). (Note that these diagrams include the four principles of spiritual psychology: *consciousness* comes under **TEACHING**; *spiritual practice* is **SPIRITUAL PRACTICE**; *teachers* and *transmission* come under **TEACHER-PUPIL TRANSMISSION**.)

Diagram 10
The Four Different Meanings of “Teaching”



Every aspect of the spiritual life can be placed in this model. And that includes the notion of “teaching” itself (see Diagram 10). But here are some others. After *The Book of Enlightened Masters* (see Notes) came out, I received a letter from a reader who was concerned about standards in the spiritual life. In fact, the very idea that there *are* standards that are straightforwardly graspable is itself *Cool Structured*. Clearly, *Hot Structured*, *Hot Unstructured* and *Cool Unstructured* will see the matter very differently:

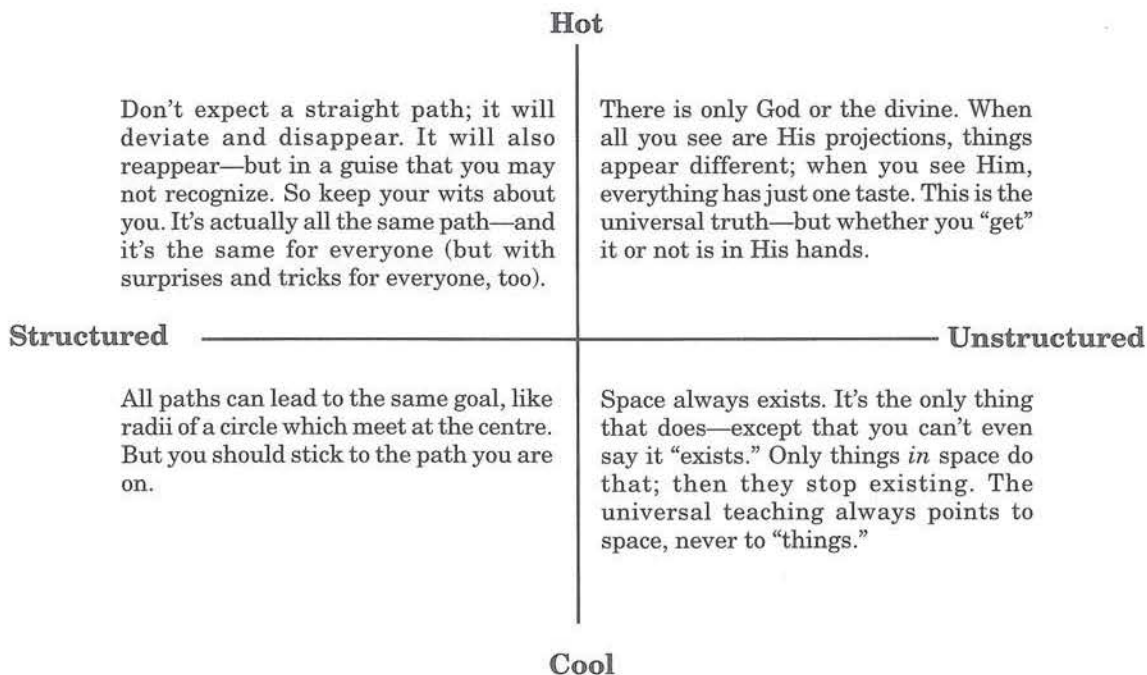
| | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Cool Unstructured</i> | only one standard—so it isn’t really a standard at all |
| <i>Hot Unstructured</i> | only one standard (God)—so it’s beyond all standards |
| <i>Hot Structured</i> | many standards, all of them stretchable and collapsible before your very eyes (assuming you can catch a glimpse of them in the first place) |

This affects the question of whether a teacher lives up to certain standards—an issue I come back to at the end of this article.

The nature, place, and function of the intellect also change its import according to the *Hot/Cool/Structured/Unstructured* model. And just as accessible/rational standards are *Cool Structured*, so is the intellect as it is understood and lauded in the modern West. But *Unstructured* teachings, whose highest value is beyond form, are never going to have much time for a faculty that is by its very nature concerned with form and structure. Nor are *Hot* teachings: they will always place something way beyond the intellect at the centre of the path (and as the knower of truth). For *Hot Unstructured* traditions, it will be faith or love; for *Hot Structured* ones, it will be courage, risk-taking. Of course, there is nothing wrong with the *Cool Structured* ideal: everything has its place in the great scheme of things and it's all discoverable with the right tools and the right method. But it is only one option. And it has its limitations (as all the possibilities—*Cool Structured*, *Hot Structured*, *Hot Unstructured*, *Cool Unstructured*—do). Not to realize this is to dress up cultural prejudice in the guise of spiritual evaluation.

Then there is the notion of universalism: there are *Cool Structured/Hot Structured/Hot Unstructured/Cool Unstructured* versions of it (see Diagram 11).

Diagram 11
The Four Different Meanings of “Universalism”



The last example I want to give is that old bugbear, ethics/morality. Shouldn't a path embody or teach the "right" way to be and to behave? Answer: yes—but, as we would expect by now, the way this is done depends on the vocabulary and values we are using. Rationalism, which is the dominant ethos of our culture, is *Cool Structured*. Therefore it expects rational, considerate behaviour. But a *Hot Structured* teacher isn't going to buy that: s/he's going to be demanding, unpredictable and ostensibly inconsiderate. (Gurdjieff is a good example in modern times; so is Neem Karoli Baba—see the excellent *Miracle of Love* by Ram Dass [Dutton, NY, 1979]). Some may not find such an option convincing or attractive. But that's another matter. The point is that from a *Hot Structured* perspective, such behaviour is entirely appropriate—in fact, beneficial (whereas rational, considerate behaviour, the *Cool Structured* ideal, isn't).

A *Hot Unstructured* teaching or teacher, on the other hand, will frequently—and perhaps ultimately—be utterly impractical (when seen from a *Cool Structured* point of view). Bliss tends to be like that. (As Ramakrishna once said, "First love God; then build your hospitals and schools.") And it can burn, too. It says, "Throw all that stuff out!" "What?" we cry, "Throw out everything in my life? Be reasonable!" But the *Hot Unstructured* isn't reasonable.

As for the *Cool Unstructured*, it just doesn't pay any attention to the things of life. When Ramana Maharshi first went to Arunachala at the age of 17, he was so absorbed in the Self that he just sat there. Boys threw stones at him. He didn't even notice, much less complain about it. Gradually, over the next 50 years, an ashram grew up around him. He just let it. It had nothing to do with him. Some people complained that Brahmins were being fed separately from untouchables, as caste rules required. How could a place dedicated to the one Self that is found equally in all be caught up in such petty—such *false*—matters? Ramana paid no attention to these complaints, just as he paid no attention to the structure that had perpetuated caste distinctions in the first place. He just remained the same: the ultimate (and only) *Cool Unstructured* ideal.

My final point is this. It is our great good fortune that we live in a time and place where exemplars of the entire range of *Hot / Cool / Structured / Unstructured* splendour are available. Of course, there are weak and distorted versions of all of them. But that's always been so. And because they are all available, they can in some sense be compared. What this sense might be is still in the process of being established. But it's being established by *us*, those of us who are on the journey. That is why this article is entitled, "A Model of Experiential Comparative Religion." It's new and it's right here, waiting for us to go out and discover it.

Notes

The basic ideas outlined here are an elaboration of what can be found in my book *The Book of Enlightened Masters* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1997).

